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# CONGREGATIONAL SINGING,

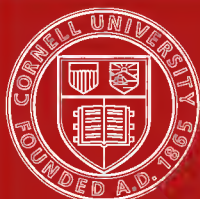
— BY —

J. H. SHERMAN

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*With the Compliments of*

THE WRITER.

## PREFACE.

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With the kindest sentiments toward both the Church and the World, I desire to promote harmony between them—so that we may cease speaking of the one as militant, and the other as opposed in antagonist array. Knowing no better means to this end than the promotion of their union in “the service of song in the house of the Lord,” I have advocated Congregational singing in its fullest measure.

The following pages comprise three papers on the subject published at considerable intervals in the *Ithaca Journal*, where, doubtless, they did more or less good. But, in order to afford them a still wider circulation and influence, I have conspired with the printer (typical representative of the World) to give them wings, and a well-known practical representative of the Church to start them on their reconciling flight among the ranks of both.

ITHACA, N. Y., DECEMBER, 1887.



## CONGREGATIONAL SINGING.

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### I.

*"Let all the People praise Thee."*—Psalms.

Time was, and that within the memory of the elders of this generation, when, except among Methodists, any man who should sing out audibly in a church congregation would be considered disrespectful to the choir, and a disturber of the musical enjoyment of his worshiping neighbors. But that time is, happily, past, except in some very high toned city churches. Congregational singing is now so well established, and so generally recognized as a proper and useful feature of public worship, that most religious societies have introduced books containing the tunes as well as hymns to be sung, in order to aid and encourage all to join in the musical service. Some are supplying all the pews liberally with such books.

That being the case, it seems not amiss to indulge in some suggestions, designed to be promotive of the best and fullest exercise of this privilege in the churches.

Successful congregational singing of course depends chiefly upon the congregation itself. All readers of music should sing, and regard themselves not as singing by sufferance, and under obligation to restrain their voices to feeble tones, but as exercising a right and performing a duty, and should do it with voices full enough to be musical and comfortable.

Those unable to read should join in the tunes as they learn them by rote. By one means or the other, a majority of church-goers can, or soon could, sing

most of the tunes used in the services. There are few or none that can sing by either, whose voices are not sufficiently musical to be available in a large company of singers. Such as are unable to sing independently will be carried along by the current, and sing with enjoyment to themselves and without detriment to the general harmony.

Congregational singers should, each for himself, try to listen to and follow the organ and recognized lead, whether the latter rests in a chorus-choir, quartette, or precentor. They will thus keep together much better than by listening to each other. The most unsuccessful marcher I ever knew tried to keep step by watching the feet of his companions, instead of attending to the fife and drum.

All parts of the harmony should be represented in the congregation as well as in a choir. We usually hear little but soprano and bass. This is wrong. Men whose voices are pitched for the tenor should sing tenor, instead of soprano or bass as they commonly do. Their voices are not needed in the soprano, and are generally not well adapted to the bass. They should sing the part Nature and the composer designed for them, and which the ear delights to hear soaring in the harmony. There are tenor voices enough so that there need be no deficiency in this part. Nature has perhaps not done quite so much for the alto. It requires a peculiar voice, or development of the chest voice, to sing this part with power, and there are not many such. This is a treasure that should be cherished and used when possessed, and should be heard in the congregation as well as in choirs. But, apart from such special voices, there are enough which can take the alto with ease and comfort to make up a fair balance in almost any church assembly. All such should be given to this part, where they will be more useful and more telling than in adding to the usually sufficient volume of soprano. In rising to sing, the congregation should rise,



as the choir does, before the hymn is commenced, so as to be settled on their feet, ready to begin with the choir at the beginning.

Of the choir it may be remarked, that successful congregational singing diminishes somewhat the conspicuousness of its function—which is then to lead instead of *doing* the singing—but by no means diminishes its importance. Instead of Knights gaining distinction by individual prowess, its members become leaders of hosts. As leaders their methods must be modified to suit the changed situation. Alas to say! the devil even invades churches. He is often present in the congregation (charmingly disguised to be sure) after Lent is over, in the time of spring bonnets. He sometimes gets up in the gallery (it is devoutly to be hoped he never ascends the pulpit steps!) when the choir, especially if a quartette, becomes prone to making a display of its musical accomplishments. Now, when hearty congregational singing is expected, such temptations must be resolutely resisted as far as the hymns are concerned. Hence Satan doubtless hates congregational singing; wherefore all christians should be in favor of it.

The exaggerated softs and louds in the gallery (what if the minister should *read* the hymns in that way!) would be lost in a great volume of song below; and liberties with the time would throw all into confusion. Steadiness of time, especially, is essential to anything like free singing in the congregation. Such singing must be, as it very commonly is, with suppressed voices, indistinct and spiritless, if singers must listen and watch anxiously to avoid being thrown off the track when the choir accelerates and retards, or makes arbitrary pauses. Two strangers at an evening service in one of our churches (I speak by knowledge,) joined in singing the hymn "Abide with me," all unprepared for the quartette's long pauses before and between the words "Oh! abide with me," with which several of the stanzas close. At the first en-

counter with these words "(I say the truth \* \* I lie not)" one of them came out with a solo "Oh !" and the other filled the next pause with "Abide," alone and with an abashed *diminuendo*. Their voices were heard no more in song, but the angels heard mental profanity !

Of course the tunes arranged with the hymns must be used, unless there are very good reasons to the contrary, and then, the most familiar tunes should be substituted. In the introductory rendering of the tune by the organist, much assistance is gained in the preparation to sing from a literal rendering, and in the time designed to be followed. It should be remembered that the congregation has not had the benefit of a rehearsal, and needs what preparatory aid can be thus given. If, before the commencement of each stanza, the organist would make a distinct pause of a second, the choir and congregation would be prepared to begin simultaneously without a premonitory call-note from the organ, so disagreeable to the ear.

Very slow time is repressive of congregational singing. It makes it hard work to sing, hard to keep in time together, and fails utterly to inspire that animated interest, which, in cheerfully brisk music, prompts all hearts and voices to chime in. In some churches, I think, this is the chief hindrance to success.

Remembering that choirs are composed of selected singers, and have rehearsals, and are capable of something more than wrestling with ordinary hymns, I would suggest that select pieces be performed (not vain-gloriously of course) during the usual basket collections. It would redound to the proper appreciation of the choir, would mask somewhat the secular appearance of such collections, and peradventure help the generous impulses of the congregation—as the courage of soldiers is helped, and they go more cheerfully into battle by the sound of inspiring music.

And now, from the congregation and choir I naturally come to the clergyman. But here I hesitate—troubled with misgivings. I will however suggest their encouragement of singing in the congregation—the most free and general—as one of the best means of infusing life into the church and society. By joining in the song of praise “all the people” become active participants in worship. They listen to the other exercises, more or less attentively, but they *help* in this, and their interest is aroused. It is hard to find a church without life where this prevails; and not easy to find one whose music is confined to a quartette—especially a quartette of high-art propensities—noted for religious fervor. Sankey’s singing, swelled by a chorus of thousands of voices, was as effective in drawing crowds as Moody’s preaching. The singing hosts of the Beecher churches, in Brooklyn and Elmira, were ever efficient aids in bringing throngs thither,—stimulating them to press forward, upon coming within hearing of the soaring praise, as they would not toward the sound of prayer or sermon. We all retain through life much of that instinctive impulse which sends children upon a run towards the music of a band, or of fife and drum. The Broad and Arch street Methodist church of Philadelphia, distinguished for its multitude of singers, led by organ and precentor, is thronged to overflowing—evenings especially—by persons from other churches and no churches, attracted largely by the happiness of mingling their voices in the great tide of song. Should any one object that this is not the highest motive for church-going, it may be replied that it is necessary to have the hearers before higher motives can be brought to bear upon them; and that when you have got the hardest sinners engaged in singing divine songs, you have them at least in a softening mood.

I may also refer to the importance, which some clergymen do not seem to realize, of making very

distinct announcements of the hymns. They should be made as if addressed to the most distant persons in the room. There is apt to be a slight movement of the audience in reaching for books and opening them, sending a rustle through the house just as this announcement is made, to the partial hinderance of hearing. The number of the hymn is very commonly repeated, and should be always and in clear accents, and after a sufficient pause for the rustle to cease. Overaction in the matter, however, is not recommended. One preacher at University Chapel, proceeding along the line of his announcement in a moderate tone till he came to the number of the hymn, suddenly popped up an octave with explosive emphasis! I like very distinct announcements, but he "snited me too well."

Clergymen should read the hymns in full. It may furnish to themselves a profitable elocutionary exercise, and interest their hearers. To hear a hymn read by the venerable Dr. Furnace was better than listening to some whole sermons I have heard. It also enables all to find the place in their books, and, upon occasion, note certain way-marks, such as repeats, *da capos*, the position of thirds and fifths upon the staff, and unfamiliar points in the tune. But when the hymn is merely announced, or only one line or stanza read, the organist, prepared by foreknowledge of the hymns, begins his rehearsal at once, and is far advanced before some of the congregation have even found their places,—especially if they fail to understand, or misunderstand the hasty announcement, and are obliged to turn to the index of first lines, or resort to neighbors for information. In such case, they can at best only fall in as stragglers by the way, and, as the result of a blind start, may go stumbling to the end. Time and opportunity should be afforded for the best performance of this part of the service of which the congregation is capable. It is an awakener of joyous religious emotions; and the

Hebrews rationally believed it most acceptable to Deity.

Preachers sometimes cut short the time allotted to singing, because "the evening is very warm," or "the services have been long already," etc., putting the audience off with the doxology in place of the final hymn, or omitting it altogether. Now, church services are for the people as well as the preacher, if he does get the pay; and this, where congregational singing prevails, is especially the people's part, and they are entitled to it in "full tale." They will not grudge the few moments required for its orderly performance under any circumstances, and may feel disappointed if deprived of it. The principal part of the services falls to the share of the clergyman in any case, and if he deems a slight curtailment at any time advisable, let him not rob the people of any part of their pittance, but make it out of the sermon rather—or even the long prayer. The audience will then go away contented—being unaware of its privation.

## II.

*"Stand up and praise the Lord."*—*Nehemiah.*

The praise here referred to, as now generally intended and understood, is a form of worship, and not in any respect akin to flattery. Its design, corresponding with its undoubted effect, is to elevate the emotions of those actively or passively joining in it, rather than to gratify its object. It will suffice to say, in order to make the distinction perfectly plain to everybody, that its purpose is subjective rather than objective.

Originally the case was different, as well with the Jews as with the worshippers of heathen gods. Sometimes praise was uttered in the way of boasting of the superiority of each people's particular god over all others; but more commonly to win the good graces of the lauded deity. Sometimes verbal praise was

replaced or reinforced by the burning of sweet-scented gums in the temples, or under the noses of idol images of deities,—in the belief that the fumes which were delightful to the olfactories of devotees would be equally agreeable to those of their gods, and please and propitiate them. This is the theory of burning incense to this day, though not always its conscious purpose.

Among the Hebrews, as with us, divine praise was usually uttered in song, with or without accompaniment of musical instruments. That it might be in a form of profound respect due its object, it was required to be offered *standing*. By what right is this requirement so commonly disregarded in our churches? Whatever the correct theory may be as to the party to be affected by them, these praises are addressed to Deity, and should be offered reverentially and with decorum. If privileged to address royalty, would you not (I ask Episcopalians,) rise up in the august presence? If you were to address the president of the United States, (I ask Baptists, Congregationalists, and all who are attached to democratic churches,) would you remain sitting? Attorneys, though not heavily burdened with humility, never address a court thus. The oldest lawyer among you could not thus address the youngest justice of the peace without receiving a merited rebuke.

Lawyers not only gain a hearing by standing up, but can thus make better speeches. So the singer can command his voice and apply his energies to better advantage upon his feet. The act of rising dispels any lurking drowsy tendencies derived possibly from preceding services, or lack of due attention to them—gives a reactive spring to his powers of mind and body, and prepares him to sing with freedom and in the spirit. I am of course referring to congregational singing, where the masses are or should be engaged as actors, but cannot, to any good purpose, in a passive, receptive posture upon the cushioned seats.

Congregational singing, led by a choir, and heartily performed by a full congregation *en masse*, is the ideal of church music. It has sometimes been my good fortune to hear it in its great power and perfection ; but never with the congregation seated.

An ill performance of a duty is little better than its omission. In the one or two hymns which they rise to sing, our congregations delay rising till the hymns are well under way in the gallery, and then get up and fall in as they can, to the serious marring of the whole performance, and the very questionable gain of any merit for respect shown the object of the mutilated praise. *Either rise or sit!* would, I think, be the injunction of an earthly power thus awkwardly addressed. Were I a Catholic priest, I would correct the evil by requiring a special confession for it and imposing a severe penance. Were I a protestant clegyman, I would take counsel with the deacons and concoct some plan to bring the people to their feet betimes. If ten righteous men in any church, including the deacons, (a number too large to be looked for in Sodom, but not in a Christian church, I think) would set the example of rising at the proper time, *i. e.* when members of the choir rise and take their places to sing, I believe a reformation would be quickly affected.

The fault here condemned is very noticeable (and its effect very unfortunate, I fear) in the case of singing the doxology at the beginning or close of church services. Here the object of praise is stated in the very first words, which are omitted by the tardily rising congregation. I am not so sure how it would be in a court of casuistry, but in a court of law all that follows would be held as a nullity in the mouths of the congregation, for uncertainty as to the intended recipient of their adoration.

If I was writing for heathen readers, or writing as a heathen, I might suggest another consequence of still more serious import. It is well understood in

idolatrous countries that their gods are jealous of each other's honors, and unscrupulously wrest to their own exaltation any praise or service to the aim or proprietorship of which the least flaw or doubt can be attached. Such envious and dishonest gods infested Canaan all along ancient Jewish history, and had hosts of worshippers, open or secret, even among the chosen people from whom our own religious ideas are largely derived. Their opportunities for unfair appropriations were therefore great. Who knows (I now write as a heathen) but some of them may have followed down to our own time, and may lurk like Satan in the air, ready for their old tricks? And if so, what may not become of the doxology as sung by laggards who miss the essential first words? Dagon may claim it!

Though not following strictly in the train of my text, I cannot forego this opportunity for a reference to the choir. In all that pertains to the hymns, an important office of the organist and choir is to guide and aid the musical devotions of the congregation. To this end the introductory organ rehearsal should be plain and in the proper time, so that the unskilled may gain helpful preparation for partaking in the service of song. The choir should sing together as with one voice in steady time—no one springing ahead to affect leadership by a premature striking of notes—and then the attendant voices of the congregation will swell up in easy unison.

I knew an organist (in Texas) who in the main played charmingly, but in the introductory rehearsals went frisking along in such style that it was hard to tell whether he was playing the tune to be sung, or Fisher's Horn-pipe. I knew a precentor (in Arkansas) who persisted in striking the notes in advance of his followers, making them come in as an echo! and if they at any time skipped up to him, he would at once leap ahead, and maintain his distance by a vigorous beating of the time—his hand following a little after



his voice so as to keep them back. He was an exasperating nuisance ; and being in Arkansas was of course shot.

### III.

*"Line upon line."*—*Isaiah.*

Several years ago I presented in the *Ithaca Journal*, as well as I could, the superior merits of congregational singing over all other forms of music for sanctuary services. Greater results than have followed that effort might perhaps have been reasonably expected ; but then, if one exhortation produced reform it would be bad for the vocation of reformers, through press or pulpit. "Line upon line, and precept upon precept," is what brings conviction to the taught, and a living to the teacher.

Evangelists tell us, that if they can get a sinner himself to praying, however awkwardly, he is much nearer salvation than when even most humbly adopting supplications, however faultless, voiced by others. Equally true is it that congregations at large enter most into the spirit of divine praise, when with their own voices they swell its song, in such style as they can.

Such being the case, it might seem strange that congregational singing should have fallen into such disuse as existed in the early part of this century. It had been prevalent in New England in earlier times. The Pilgrims and their offspring made forest arches ring with melodious praise for Divine guidance to this land of "freedom to worship God." Love in their hearts caused songs to burst from the lips of the people. Attuned to the expanse of Nature's great temples, their stalwart voices nearly raised roofs when confined in "temples made with hands." But, at length, such terrible theology as that of the school of Jonathan Edwards bereft of melody the hearts of the multitude ; and the service of praise came to be performed perfunctorily by choirs selected for the pur-

pose ; and consisted largely of doleful minor strains suggestive of wails from the pit.

Monopolists, of things good or bad, are jealous of their privileges ; and the privileged singers in the gallery ill brooked singing in the pews. I am not aware that infringers of their monopoly were ever preached against from the pulpit, but they were sometimes pilloried by the pens of the literary. In my boyhood, tales, such as now abound in the magazines and newspapers, were few, but what we had were perhaps the more profitably read, for a moderate consumption of such viands is better than a surfeit. One, written to rebuke and ridicule a deacon of singing propensities, who persisted in helping the choir from his pew, may be recalled in this connection. The offender being proof against hints, broad or pointed (so the story ran), the pastor was induced to interfere. But the sturdy deacon refused to be silenced, and decided, rather, to change his church-fellowship to the next parish. The choir of that parish heard of the matter, and the recusant, when he called upon their pastor, was confronted with a stiff remonstrance against his reception. He sadly returned. But whether he ceased church-going and became a scoffer and a cast-away, or quit singing and died happy in the bosom of the church, or exactly how the moral of the story was worked out, my memory is not clear ; but the choir's prerogative was triumphantly vindicated.

A reaction came in with Methodism ; but congregational singing spread slowly into other denominations—more slowly, perhaps, because the Methodists, with their free grace, and free speech for women in open meeting, as well as free singing all over the house, were regarded as a little cranky.

But it did spread, gradually gaining foothold in nearly all protestant churches. It is practiced, however, with greatly varying efficiency, which is apt to be in inverse ratio to the perfection of choirs. Where

the latter are salaried and artistically trained quartettes—"singing," as Dr. Talmage expresses it, "like four angels in the gallery"—singers in the congregation are likely to be few, and timid in the use of their voices. Their own inferiority of performance and occasional mistakes, made prominent by the thin volume of sound in the body of the house, are repressive enough; but embarrassment is often painfully increased by the difficulty of keeping in time with the gallery—where (I except all exceptions), accelerations, retardations, and dead pauses are indulged in ad libitum for the sake of musical effects. Or, if a plain singer escapes being unhorsed by such wanton prancings, and, thinking at any time that a space of steady movement is fallen upon, begins to be emboldened to let out his voice, he is liable to be left sailing in the air by a sudden drop into a pianissimo strain.

Quartettes are important agencies in perfecting musical art, and have a widening field for its practice; but the leading of congregational singing is not their mission, unless they will for the occasion forego displays of their peculiar acquirements, forbear thrusting anthems into the place of hymns, and use their powers in such steady time-movements and reasonable stress of voice as less cultured singers can easily share in.

With chorus choirs the case is better. Their numbers and more limited training discourage much essaying after the nicer musical effects, and necessitate steady time to keep themselves together. The congregation can therefore depend upon them for straight work and fair dealing; and, under shelter of a strong volume of sound from the gallery, can indulge their own voices with satisfactory freedom.

Perhaps, however, the most favorable condition of any for this purpose is where there is no choir at all, but a precentor to lead. The model precentor conspires with the organist to maintain uniform time from the opening to the last note of the tune; and congregational singers, each holding an ear wide open

to his voice, can keep exact step with him throughout. Here every one feels an equality of privilege with every one else, with an equal duty of doing his share. It is found that a large proportion of any audience can sing when thus brought out. And no wonder. For the natural ability is rarely lacking; and most have in youth some musical training in the common and in Sunday-schools. This will suffice, with a little continued pains, to start them as singers in the congregational choir. But to make their primary training available, as well as for utilizing and improving the acquirements of their elders, there must be books to sing from. Hymnals should be accessible to all. Thus equipped, all should rise before the organ rehearsal is completed, so as to be resting comfortably upon their feet and ready to commence promptly with the leader. Good soldiers do not wait for their captain to begin the battle alone.

Two of our churches (Methodist) have within the last year economized by dispensing with their choirs. They will find the change no loss, but a gain to ecclesiastic prosperity, if it shall induce more general participation in the service of song. In order to this, however, "hymn and tune books" must be more liberally supplied. One of them (the State Street) is so lacking in these, or even plain hymn-books, that would-be participants must often possess the genius of a lady of my acquaintance, who, in such case, can improvise both hymn and tune, and sing like a saint in glory. I have noticed many in this church—no books within yards of them—apparently thus improvising; though, instead of special displays of genius, these may have been cases of apt memorizing. Here, with proper facilities, the volume of praise would ascend with power. The material is abundant, and the spirit favorable.

Methodists are natural-born singers; or, if not, melody enters their souls at the second birth. In camp-meetings—I mean especially of the former

times—where sinners (especially female) were struggling under conviction in the tents, even outsiders could tell when the crisis was past and they had “come out triumphant,” by their breaking forth into singing. That the divine impulse may have free course, it would be well, here as elsewhere, to invest in books the savings resulting from the non-payment of choirs, till all attendants shall be sufficiently accommodated.

The motives to church-going are various, and ought all to be encouraged. Some chiefly regard the sermon. Others rejoice mostly in the prayers. And many are largely (some perhaps principally) attracted by the enjoyment of joining in the songs of praise. These last and others of doubtful piety (most needing to be brought in), are sometimes kept away by the lack referred to.

Let the churches be once well supplied, and then resist importunities for changes of books. One is about as useful as another : and it is of greater consequence that people should be familiar with their music and sing, than have what amateurs may recommend as the latest and best. Most of the useful tunes in all of them are copied from old books from generation to generation, but shifted into new arrangements, and often damagingly altered by sacriligious compilers. When occasions for change actually arise, I think the churches should work toward uniformity in their books. It would be promotive of harmony here, and helpful in preparing all for union, in the hereafter, in songs wherein little of denominationalism will probably appear. It would make it better, too, for peripatetic (I heard a clergyman call it vagabond) christians, who go around more or less in attendance upon different churches, without being sealed to any. As it is, such must supply themselves with the hymnals of all denominations to insure them a personal part in the services of any.

Ordinarily, I think, the place for serving the

Lord for a salary in our churches should be limited to the pulpit and a seat at the organ. Formerly, it was a desired distinction to sing in the choir, and pecuniary compensation for singing would have been as little expected as for attending church, or taking part in prayer meetings. Choirs were large, and made up from each congregation, and contented themselves with singing the hymns that were read—with an anthem show-off upon Thanksgiving and a few very rare occasions. But at length came sheet music, and singers proud of their proficiency in reading it, who became musical leaders and prevailed in its substitution for many of the hymns—tending to check congregational singing and exclude the less skilled from choirs. It necessitated singers of special cultivation, with time for regular rehearsals, who must be paid for their time and talents. Hence followed quartettes, and congregations educated into listening more and more in silent admiration of artistic proficiency, till some are in danger of losing their voices and devotional emotions in this part of worship, together with their tolerance of volunteer, or any but specially artistic choirs :

“First Pastor—You have a paid choir, I believe ?

Second Ditto—Yes, and a very good one.

First Pastor—I don't believe in them. It is wrong in principle and is an extravagance a church should not sanction.

Second Ditto—That's what I thought, my dear brother, but it got so in my church that we were compelled either to pay the people to stay and listen to a volunteer choir or pay a choir to sing, so on the score of economy we concluded to hire a choir instead of a congregation.”

The evil ends not here. Being hired to give an artistic finish to services in the department of praise, quartettes are assuming to do it also in that of prayer. The first step in this direction was a rounding out response after the minister had prayed. The next, and

last as yet, consists in thrusting in an elegant introduction to his supplications. The first I ever saw of this last innovation was in a fashionable church of Philadelphia about ten years ago. When the minister arose and spread his hands the organ sounded forth a "Hold on, parson!" and while he waited standing in a discomfited attitude, the "paid choir" sat and chanted the Lord's Prayer with whimpering voices, and heads hanging in beautiful sanctimony! The minister was a high spirited, combative Universalist, fresh from the independent West, and I wondered that he stood it so meekly.

To what lengths this sort of thing may go no man can safely predict. At present I see not how the preacher can be interfered with in his sermon—unless compelled to pause between divisions (as secondly, thirdly, etc.,) for strains to be warbled by the choir—as, at some celebrations, cannon are fired between toasts. Indeed, if I mistake not, some foreshadowings of even this have already appeared.

It is related of early colonial times in Massachusetts, when church singing was chiefly congregational and by rote, that emulation between rivals for leadership was sometimes such that, as soon as a hymn was read, two or three would start off with different tunes, or plunge into the same with most unequal gallop; and each persevere to the end with such followers as he could get, trying to drown the voices of the others. Which style of sanctuary performance—colonial vigorous, or modern exquisite—would receive most attention from the angels above, can hardly be matter for a positive opinion; though it may be imagined that while to the former they might listen and laugh, they would ignore the latter altogether and attend to business—or blow their trumpets.











